



Bellwether Magazine

Volume 1
Number 49 *Spring 2001*

Article 17

4-1-2001

From Russia to America: The Story of Maurice (Morris) Zurkow, V'10

Robert R. Marshak
University of Pennsylvania

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FROM RUSSIA TO AMERICA

I can't recall having met Maurice (Morris) Leon Zurkow (V'10), yet I feel that I know him well. It seems more than likely that our paths crossed sometime between 1956, when I joined the Veterinary School Faculty, and 1974, when he died at the age of 87. But the extraordinary story of his personal and professional life was unknown to me until the appearance of an article in *Health Affairs*¹ about a Fellowship in Large Animal Reproduction established by his daughter, Gloria Rubin, and her husband Henry, to honor his memory.

Morris Zurkow was born on December 15, 1887, in Slutsk, a *shtetl* in White Russia (Belarus) without natural resources or its own rail connection. It was, nonetheless, a vibrant community, one of the foremost centers of Jewish learning in Eastern Europe. Mordecai Waxman, a distinguished American Rabbi whose father came from Slutsk, gives us a mental image of *huddled houses, of frequently mired streets, of a square girdled by synagogues, and houses of study*. In discussing the tiny city's heritage Waxman writes that *the Jewish philosophers of the middle ages, dead and forgotten in many other communities, were part of the intellectual fare of many in Slutsk, (a) community in which the modern spirit of the new era was fully alive side by side with ancient ideas and practices. This all-embracing spirit was carried by those who departed Slutsk into other lands.*

I like to think that this legacy, grounded in ancient wisdom — his father was a Talmudic scholar — and in the *Haskalah* (the enlightenment movement that swept East European

Jewry at the end of the nineteenth century), helps us to understand how Morris Zurkow was able to overcome so many hardships and to live his life so well. A succinct chronicle of his remarkable life's journey was acquired through various papers, and in conversations and correspondence with the Rubins.

From early on Morris hungered for an education, but chose not to follow in the religious tradition of his father. At 13, a tall boy with a wary eye for the brutal Czarist police's frequent round-ups of Jewish teenagers for army service, he somehow managed to book ship passage for America. On arriving at Ellis Island, he embraced the idea of a whole new way of life and the urgent necessity of learning a new language. He worked extremely hard at mastering English, and later took pleasure in relating how reading Shakespeare — he could quote entire passages, even late in life — helped him to acquire fluency. He was particularly proud of his ability to speak English without a trace of foreign accent.

Morris' ambition to make something of himself and his refusal to work in New York City's immigrant-ghetto sweat shops impelled him to seek out an agricultural trade school for immigrant boys sponsored by Baron de Hirsch, a French banker and philanthropist. The school was located on a 270 acre farm in Woodbine, New Jersey.

Working and studying at a self-sustaining farm was an eye-opening and immensely appealing experience for the young Morris, and it was there that his fascination with "the

science of veterinary medicine" began. He discovered that a classmate, Benjamin Chodos, also harbored an ambition to become a veterinarian, and following weeks of discussion they applied together for admission to Penn's School of Veterinary Medicine. Both were accepted.

During his student days at Penn, Morris supported himself by working as a street-car conductor and as a checker in the kitchen of Hackney's, a well-known seafood restaurant in Atlantic City. To make ends meet, he and Ben Chodos often walked from Woodbine to Philadelphia, thus saving the cost of train fare. A prescient quotation from the 1910 class yearbook, *Veterinary Record*, informs us that Zurkow *has a good supply of push in him, and this will stand him in good stead when he gets out to fight his battles as a professional man.*

Upon receiving his VMD degree, Dr. Zurkow took a teaching position for a year at the New York State Veterinary College² at Cornell University, married Esther Raybin, whom he had met in New York City, and then, after a brief period in private practice in Pennsylvania, accepted a posi-



Dr. Zurkow in 1910, photographed on the occasion of his graduation from the University of Pennsylvania School of Veterinary Medicine.



the STORY of MAURICE

tion with the USDA Bureau of Animal Industry. While in government service during the next several years he was frequently transferred, first to Minnesota, and then to stations in Kansas, Indiana, Ohio, California, and, finally, Delaware. In California, his most challenging assignment, his job was to help stem an epidemic of foot-and-mouth disease in cattle grazing on public lands in the Sierra Madre Mountains. It was wild country in those days, but Dr. Zurkow, a robust, spirited man in the prime of life, loved the wilderness and the rugged outdoor life. To round up strays he rode into the mountains with ranchers and cowhands on horseback, covering great distances between water sources where the cattle were likely to congregate. Pack horses carried supplies and food, everything from salt pork to fragile eggs.

It was during Dr. Zurkow's last government assignment, in Delaware, that he reckoned it was time to put down enduring roots. Three of his four children had been born and would need stability and access to good schools. In 1924, the family settled on a farm near Dover, one of America's oldest cities.

Because there were only four veterinarians in the entire State, Dr. Zurkow soon had a very

busy practice, covering the southern counties of Kent and Sussex. He was on call day and night, seven days a week, often driving sixty miles between farms on narrow dirt roads in his Model T. When there was free time he sought relaxation and pleasure in sports, reading, and in working with the many varieties of roses, azaleas, and other plants in the large garden surrounding his house.

Dr. Zurkow's devotion to his clients was deeper than any personal issue. Healthy animals were the life-blood of the family farm and he believed passionately in the purpose and worth of his labors. He thought of himself as a *country vet* and he treasured his special place amongst the hardy, genuine people who worked the soil and tended their stock. When clients couldn't pay for his services, particularly through the years of the great depression, he accepted vegetables or other home-grown produce. There was always plenty of food on the Zurkow family table. Although his interest in clinical veterinary medicine was more applied than theoretical, he kept-up with the literature and took great pleasure in making a difficult diagnosis or in identifying a disease he had never seen before. He possessed the intuition,

judgment, common sense, and good hands that one finds in the best of practitioners. In some respects, he was ahead of his time, developing special competence in reproductive disorders; he was, for example, one of the first veterinarians to attempt the artificial insemination of dairy cows. In 1962, after fifty-two years of government service and private practice, Dr. Zurkow was honored by the Delaware Veterinary Medical Association, an organization he had founded. He took the occasion to assure his colleagues and the local press that the thought of



Dr. Zurkow in 1925 riding the range with the rangers in the Sierra Madre Mountains (California) of Stanislaus National Park as part of the U.S. Department of Agriculture program to control an outbreak of Hoof-and-Mouth disease

retiring had not crossed his mind.

I was drawn to write this brief piece about a man I did not know, in part, because I shared a fragment of his vanished world as a large animal veterinarian³ during the 1940s and '50s, but mainly because it is the captivating story of a young boy on his own, escaping a country soon to be consumed by fire and darkness, courageously confronting the harsh immigrant experience, excelling in a career far removed from what would have been remotely possible in czarist Russia, where Jews were forbidden to work the land or to acquire a university education. And finally, this is very much a Penn story.

1. *Health Affairs* was a magazine published by Penn's four Health Schools. Dr. Zurkow's story appeared in the 1975 summer issue.
2. Renamed the College of Veterinary Medicine
3. Robert Marshak was in a dairy cattle practice in Vermont for eleven years, 1945 to 1956.



Dr. Zurkow and one of his "patients," the prize stud bull "Carnation Stoutheart," owned by Pernell Friedel, a prominent Delaware dairy farmer. "Stoutheart" was sold for \$10,000 (an unheard of price in the 1940's) to one of Wisconsin's largest dairy farms.

(MORRIS) ZURKOW, V'10

by Robert R. Marshak, D.V.M.